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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MUSCAT 000208

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP, NEA/PI, DRL
USTR FOR J. BUNTIN AND A. ROSENBERG
DOL FOR J. SHEA, B. SHEPARD AND J. RUDE

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SUBJECT: UNIONS PLANNING FOR NATIONAL ELECTIONS

Classified By: Ambassador Gary A. Grappo for Reasons 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Oman's unions are expected to form a General Federation and participate in direct elections for national leadership in April 2008. The elected federation will replace a national worker representative body appointed by the government in 2005 before employee unions were legalized. While most contacts believe that the elections are a sign of unions' steady development in Oman, some assert that labor may be insufficiently organized at the enterprise and sector levels to participate in truly meaningful elections. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Oman will hold its first labor congress before the end of April 2008 in Muscat, labor leaders tell poloff, during which unions are expected to form a national-level representative body -- the General Federation of Oman's Laborers -- and elect its members. Although organizers have not yet announced an official date, contacts say that the congress likely will span two days, April 21-22. The Ministry of Manpower (MOM) reportedly is covering the costs of the event, which will be held under the auspices of the International Labor Organization (ILO), and include representatives from the Arab Labor Organization (ALO) and other Arab, European and Asian labor federations who will participate as observers. Labor leaders involved in planning the congress state that all unions officially registered with the MOM by April 15 will be eligible to participate in elections and approve the General Federation's constitution and by-laws.

¶3. (C) The newly-elected General Federation will replace an existing body of the same name, whose members initially were appointed by the government in 2005 to serve on the Main Representative Committee (MRC), an organization that predated unions. After Royal Decree 74 of July 2006 legalized unions and ended Oman's previous system of worker representative committees, Minister of Manpower Juma bin Ali al Juma reportedly asked the members of the MRC to continue in their leadership roles to help him support union development. However, some leaders of unions at the enterprise level say that this arrangement created a gap between the federation and the unions it was meant to serve. Many of these leaders also say that they have had little to no contact with the national body. Nebhan al-Battashi, president of the union at the Grand Hyatt Hotel in Muscat and a current member of the federation, told poloff that he hopes the upcoming elections will better connect the General Federation to its constituent base and provide it with a measure of credibility both at home and abroad by being truly representative of Oman's workers.

¶4. (C) In an effort to prepare unions for the congress and

for membership in the new national body, federation members recently held a meeting attended by most of Oman's unions in which they announced the congress and explained election procedures. According to Saoud al-Jabri, acting chairman of the federation who gave poloff a readout of the meeting, each eligible union will be able to send two representatives to the congress. Every representative will have an independent vote, and will be asked to choose 11 persons through direct elections to serve on the General Federation, and ten more to serve on two independent committees that will oversee the federation's administrative and financial affairs.

Candidates for these 21 positions must already be elected members of their own union's administrative body. Jabri further told the assembled union representatives that the federation had decided to limit the candidate pool to leaders of Muscat-based unions. "This is where the government and most of Oman's businesses are. The General Federation will be headquartered here, and we want a body whose members are ready to work," Jabri informed poloff. (Note: This decision may end up limiting the General Federation's influence nationally. A union leader from the coastal city of Sur who attended the meeting told poloff separately that some representatives of unions outside of Muscat "appeared deflated" when they heard they would be excluded from leadership positions. End note.)

¶15. (C) Jabri stated that the federation already has received the names of a number of candidates, and that all twelve of the current federation members also intend to run. Voting likely will take place on the second day of the congress, and Jabri said that he expects the ILO and other international observers to announce the election results on the same day. In what Jabri said was a difficult decision to reach, the federation approved a quota of two seats on the new body for

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women. Finally, near the end of the congress, the newly-elected members of the General Federation will be asked to choose their executive board from among themselves in a closed door meeting. "The elections are the fruit of three years of work," Jabri told poloff. "I am proud of what we have accomplished."

¶16. (C) Some labor leaders and government officials are concerned, however, that elections for national-level representation may be premature given the early stage of union development. The elections will involve a relatively small pool of participants, contacts point out. As of March 2008, the Ministry of Manpower's (MOM) Directorate of Labor Care reported that there were a total of only 36 unions nationwide. By limiting the number of unions that can field candidates for election to those based in Muscat, the pool shrinks further - contacts estimate that there could be as few as 24 Muscat area unions by the eligibility cut-off date.

In addition, unions have yet to develop sector-level representation, which some contacts in government and labor see as a prerequisite for effective organization at the national level. Furthermore, some union leaders have told poloff that many of their colleagues still are unaware that there will be a congress in April or how to participate as a candidate. They worry that as a result, many of the current federation members will win the elections by default and that unions will miss the opportunity to install fresh leadership.

¶17. (SBU) Comment: Despite some skepticism over whether unions are ready to participate in direct elections for national leadership, most contacts believe that imperfect elections for the General Federation now may be better than none at all. Labor, business and government officials have expressed some frustration with the current members of the federation, who often have appeared unsure of their role or purpose. Contacts hope that the election will give the General Federation a mandate to spread awareness about union issues, help unions organize their respective workplaces, and act as a credible partner for unions, business and government -- steps, contacts say, that are necessary for unions to

continue their albeit modest development process. End
Comment.
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